

US, Sabah linked strongly through education

TBP 13.09.2021 P.06

Nancy Lal

EDUCATION has and will always be a strong link between Sabah and the United States of America.

This is because education is critical to anybody's future opportunities, said US Ambassador to Malaysia, Brian McFeeters.

"You have to start with education," he said in a virtual interview with The Borneo Post recently.

The education link between the United States and Sabah, he said, is a high priority for the Embassy and him personally and he favours the people to people approach in education programs.

McFeeters said among programs the US Embassy in Malaysia offers youths in the country are the Young South East Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI), the International Visitor and Leadership Program (IVLP), English Access Microscholarship Program (Access) and the Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program.

There was also the English Teaching Assisted (ETA) which was halted and the Embassy hoped it would be allowed to resume.

He disclosed that the Access program was conducted at SM St. Patrick Tawau in Sabah in 2019 where 40 underprivileged students were selected for the program, adding that the Access program is something that the United States conducts around the world.

"It's a program where we can find students who can benefit the most from the program and where we have partners who can manage the program as well," said McFeeters.

The Access program provides a foundation of English language skills to bright, economically-disadvantaged students, primarily ages 13 to 20. The Access program, funded by the US State Department Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, integrates cross-curricular approaches to attract students to learn English and exposes them to a better understanding and knowledge of the United States, its people and culture. Each student will complete at least 360 hours of English study over the course of two years and must attend the intensive sessions during school breaks.

"These are all premier leadership programs and we certainly want to continue them. Some of the programs have been



Brian McFeeters

on hold because of the Covid-19 pandemic and we hope to be able to continue (with them soon).

"We have a Sabahan student chosen for space camp and this again, is pending until travel is allowed as Alabama has some issues because of Covid-19. So education programs are certainly a very high priority and we love these programs.

He added that the US Embassy to Malaysia also has an important partnership with Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) and an American Corner has been set up in the public higher learning institute.

The current focus in the American Corner is on environment and there are regular programs focusing on the environment with a lot of opportunity for interaction, he disclosed.

McFeeters, when asked for his advice for youths in Sabah in terms of education, stressed on the importance of education for their future.

"In terms of the US programs we urge them to apply now. I spoke to a young Malaysian woman recently who participated in the YES program and asked how she found out about the program. She said it was through the English Teaching Assisted, so the programs reinforced each other," he said.

The challenge now is to get the word out to youths in Malaysia and to do this during this time when things are hampered by the Covid-19 pandemic, the US Embassy uses social media to create awareness of its programs that are available.

"When the situation permits and we are able to get out to schools, I personally would do it and I always enjoyed doing talks in universities and high schools. I would encourage our other officers to do so as well, that is generally a big part of our program.

"In Sabah the best multiplier we have is the American Corner at UMS, we and our partners there would publicize information about our programs. In the past two years, we have had America Days around July 4 in Sabah and we centred around

America corners with programs and that would be another way of getting the message out and across to the youths," he added.

Touching on the US Embassy's women empowering program, Academy for Women Entrepreneurs (AWE) which has included participants from Sabah, McFeeters said it is a program that the Embassy is proud of.

"I was delighted to have a chance to launch the second cohort of 50 women, 10 from Sabah who are enrolled in the AWE in Malaysia. It is a nine to 10-month program based on a curriculum entrepreneur development program from the Arizona State University's (ASU) Thunderbird School of Global Management.

"We at the embassy are very proud of these women and I had a chance to interact with the previous cohort which started last summer and are just finishing up in the program.

"We at the embassy even got to see a sampling of their products at a mini bazaar here in Kuala Lumpur and it was everything from handmade ties to different kinds of honey and soap, a nice variety of products with a heavy component of partnership from Sabah, including SWEPA (Sabah Women Entrepreneurs & Professionals Association).

"We just think the world of that program and we have a very talented Malaysian partner, the Women Entrepreneur Network Association (WENA) working on this project," he said.

SWEPA and WENA were the ones on the ground and they worked through a local network to find the participants, the ambassador said, adding that it is how it works for most of their program.

"It's getting out sharing the opportunity and sharing to people how it would benefit them and then keeping them engaged throughout the program as well, he said.

"This is generally the situation around the world, we need to get women to see how they can take more steps to benefit themselves. When we get women involved in the economy, the entire economy does better and I think that is the overall purpose of the program," he said.

AWE is a business development program that empowers women to become independent and confident entrepreneurs through capacity building, networking and mentoring opportunities.

Established by the US State Department under the White House-led Global Development

and Prosperity (W-GDP) Initiative, AWE supports the growth of women entrepreneurs around the world through a partnership with the Arizona State University's (ASU) Thunderbird School of Global Management.

AWE participants complete ASU's Dreambuilder, an online learning program that equips participants with the knowledge and tools to create and grow their own businesses, raise capital and network effectively with other business owners.

When asked for his vision on Sabah and the United States friendship, Ambassador McFeeters replied, "Sabah is very important to us, it is an important part of our Malaysian partnership.

"It is particularly important now because Sabah has this set of four overlapping issues, the environment, preservation of the environment, wildlife, significance of Sabah and its rainforest for climate and connected with that also is the research into possible

viruses that can contribute to a pandemic.

"All those are really world issues in which Sabah has a central role, but it goes beyond that, we care about the people of Sabah, it is not only the environment, it is also the people and Sabah's significance in the history of Malaysia.

"I think it is one of the places in Malaysia that adventurous Americans know about as well as its natural beauty," he said.

McFeeters is no stranger to Malaysia and has in fact vacationed in Sabah when he was first posted to the US Embassy in Malaysia as a Political Counselor from 2009 to 2011.

He said that he and his family visited the Tunku Abdul Rahman Park and also stayed at the Shangri-La's Rasa Ria Resort in Tuaran.

As he was unable to travel to Sabah again because of the pandemic, McFeeters was taken on a virtual visit to Sabah from August 16-20, where he also conducted a series of meetings with state government officials, representatives from various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and Sabahan alumni of US Embassy exchange programs to discuss U.S.-Sabah cooperation on the environment, human rights, security cooperation, public health, people-to-people exchanges, and more.

To his thoughts on what would likely attract Americans to visit Sabah, McFeeters said on his personal list is to climb

Mount Kinabalu with his family members.

"Maybe we can get a group from the Embassy to do that ... I think it is that and equal to that is all of the wildlife and underwater treasures in Sabah. We were thrilled to have that virtual tour of the marine parks... Sabah has the sea and the mountains and forest," he said.

McFeeters also had the opportunity to sample some Sabahan cuisine at the Embassy at the same time the virtual tour was held.

His favourite was the penjarang and he also took a liking to our 'hinava', 'hinompuka', 'Sabah murtabak' and 'apam balik'.

"It was a wonderful virtual week but not as wonderful as when we can come out there," he said.

During the Sabah visit, McFeeters paid a courtesy call on Chief Minister Datuk Seri Panglima Hajji Noor and during the meeting, both leaders discussed their desire to strengthen the US-Sabah public health partnership.

Covid-19 remains the top priority for the United States, and the U.S. Embassy will continue to assist Malaysia to fight the pandemic. In addition to the one million doses of Pfizer vaccines donated to Malaysia in July, the US government provided RM3.5 million to boost Covid-19 testing capacity in Sabah and another RM2 million for ambulance donations and other support to the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) in Sabah and Sarawak last year.

McFeeters also met with Kota Kinabalu Mayor Puan Noorliza Awang Alp to discuss the city's response to the ongoing pandemic, in addition to expressing deep appreciation to the Kota Kinabalu City Hall for their continuous support for the Embassy's outreach activities in the city, including America Days and other musical and cultural programming.

In meetings with officials from Sabah Parks, the Sabah Wildlife Department, and other environmentally focused NGOs, the ambassador shared the US government's focus on the climate crisis and desire to support Malaysia in its efforts to overcome this challenge.

Through the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), the US Embassy has provided assistance to protect biodiversity that is vital for Sabah's environmental

health and tourism industry with a US\$1 million grant to provide training on combating wildlife trafficking.

McFeeters also met with Sabah-based civil society organizations working on human rights issues including SUHAKAM, Sabah Human Rights Center, and Advocates for Non-discrimination and Access to Knowledge. They discussed a range of topics including ensuring freedom of expression, working together to combat trafficking in persons, and the importance of protecting the rights of stateless individuals in Sabah. The US Embassy recently launched a capacity building program to strengthen anti-trafficking organizations in Malaysia, including those in Sabah.

Other examples of the US partnership in Sabah include the United States providing 18 ScanEagle Tactical Unmanned Aerial systems worth approximately USD \$48 million to be used by the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN).

As of August 2021, 12 of the aircraft have been delivered to the RMN's first Unmanned Aerial Unit, 601 Squadron, located in Sepanggar Base, Kota Kinabalu. The last shipment of ScanEagle should be delivered by December 2021.

The United States has also funded approximately 54 RMN personnel to travel to Washington State to receive operator, mission planning and maintenance training on the ScanEagle system.

This October, the US Embassy in collaboration with the Biji-biji Initiative and MEREKA will launch YSEALI Bootcamp 2021: Sparking Digital Action - Borneo Edition. The program will consist of a webinar series, a three-week boot camp, and a mentorship component all designed to empower youth to champion social issues facing communities in Sabah and Sarawak, with a focus on the themes of diversity and inclusion, the environment, and digital equity.

The Portland-Kota Kinabalu sister city partnership was established in 2014 and has facilitated people to people exchanges, especially in areas of environmental conservation, sustainability management and research.

The USAID-funded PREDICT project in Malaysia collaborated with the Sabah Wildlife Department to study zoonotic disease transmission and pandemic prevention.